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AN ALLEGED BLEMISH IN THE *ANTIGONE* OF SOPHOCLES¹

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The alleged blemish in Sophocles' tragedy the *Antigone* which I wish to consider in this paper has to do with the matter which is discussed by Jebb in the introduction to his large edition of the *Antigone* (3d ed., pp. xviii-xix) under the marginal heading "The Dramatic Blemish." The statement of the case here made by Jebb is substantially the same as the account given by Bellermand in the Wolff-Bellermand edition (5th ed., pp. 126 ff.); but because of the pre-eminence of Jebb's among English editions of Sophocles, because his edition is likely to have more direct influence among our college students of Sophocles, and because of the limitation of time, I direct my discussion primarily toward Jebb's statement of the matter in question.

First, then, what is the dramatic blemish which Jebb finds in the *Antigone*? Of the course of the tragedy up to the point about which our discussion centers I need give only a very rapid summary. The scene is laid before the royal palace at Thebes; the time is the morning after the day when the Argive army, led by Polyneices, has been defeated by the Thebans, Polyneices and Eteocles having fallen by each other's hand. Creon, having now become king, proclaims that the body of Polyneices shall be left unburied. Antigone, after appealing unsuccessfully to her sister Ismene to join her, defies the edict, gives ceremonial burial to the body of Polyneices, is detected, and brought before Creon, to whom she admits that she violated his decree knowingly and deliberately. Creon, who had previously proclaimed that anyone who violated his edict should be punished by being stoned to death in public, determines that Antigone shall be put to death. Haemon, Creon's

¹ Read at the meeting of the Classical Association of New England at Brown University, April 7, 1916.

son, after attempting without success to dissuade Creon from his proposed course of action, leaves the stage, his last words indicating to the spectators that he is resolved not to survive Antigone. Immediately after Haemon's departure Creon, upon the remonstrance of the chorus, renounces his intention to slay Ismene, but informs them that he purposes to slay Antigone by leaving her to starve in an underground tomb. In the next episode Antigone is led by guards from the palace and, in full view of Creon, who expresses not a word of sympathy, she passes from the stage on her way to the burial chamber where she is to be entombed. After an interval occupied by a choral song Teiresias enters. He informs Creon that the gods are offended by his failure to give burial rites to Polyneices, and urges him to bury him. Creon accuses Teiresias of acting under the influence of bribes and angrily and stubbornly refuses to change his purpose. Hereupon Teiresias, roused to wrath, prophesies the death of Creon's son, hints less clearly at other calamities for his family, and makes his exit. Creon is terrified by this prophecy, and his original purpose is so far shaken that he helplessly puts himself in the hands of the chorus and asks them what he shall do. Upon their bidding him to release Antigone and to bury Polyneices he at once gives orders to his attendants to proceed immediately to where Polyneices lies, and indicates that he will go in person with them.

After a brief hyporcheme a messenger enters and reports at once that Haemon is dead; and after the entrance of Eurydice, Creon's wife, he relates in detail what was done by Creon and his attendants: how they first buried Polyneices and raised a mound, then going to Antigone's tomb found her already dead by hanging; how they found Haemon bewailing her death, and how on the entrance of Creon into the tomb Haemon in a paroxysm of despair made a lunge at his father, missed him, and then in an access of swift remorse dealt himself a fatal blow. Eurydice leaves the stage without a word. Creon enters bearing the body of Haemon; the death of Eurydice is reported from the palace; Creon admits his stupidity and wrong and bewails his fate, and the play is ended.

The adverse criticism passed by Jebb upon a certain part of this play first appeared in print, so far as I know, in his first edition

(1888); it was retained word for word in his second and third editions (1891 and 1900 respectively); the third edition, Jebb informs us in his preface, he "carefully revised"; his discussion would seem therefore to express, not a hasty judgment, but his mature opinion. In stating Jebb's position I cannot do better than to state it for the most part in his own words:

Teiresias, as we saw, came with the benevolent purpose of warning Creon that he must bury Polyneices. Creon was stubborn, and Teiresias then said that the gods would punish him. Haemon would die, because his father had been guilty of two sins—burying Antigone alive, and dishonouring the corpse of Polyneices. This prophecy assumed that Creon would remain obdurate. But, in the event, he immediately yielded; he buried Polyneices, and attempted, though too late, to release Antigone. Now suppose that he had been in time to save Antigone. He would then have cancelled both his offences. And then, we must infer, the divine punishment predicted by Teiresias would have been averted, since the prediction does not rest on any statement that a specific term of grace had expired. Otherwise we should have to suppose that the seer did not know the true mind of the gods when he represented that Creon might still be saved by repentance (1025 ff.). But the dramatic function of Teiresias obviously requires us to assume that he was infallible whenever he spoke from "the signs of his art"; indeed, the play tells us that he was so (1094).

Everything depended, then, on Creon being in time to save Antigone. The Chorus puts Creon's duties in the natural order; "free the maiden from her rocky chamber, and make a tomb for the unburied dead" (1100); and Creon seems to feel that the release, as the more urgent task, ought to have precedence. Nevertheless, when he and his men arrive on the ground, his first care is given to Polyneices. After the rites have been performed, a high mound is raised. Only then does he proceed to Antigone's prison—and then it is too late. We are not given any reason for the burial being taken in hand before the release. The dramatic fault here has nothing to do with any estimate of the chances that Creon might actually have saved Antigone's life if he had gone to her first. The poet might have chosen to imagine her as destroying herself immediately after she had been left alone in her cell. In any case, the margin for Creon must have been a narrow one. The dramatic fault is that, while we, the spectators, are anxious that Antigone should be saved, and while every moment is precious, we are left to conjecture why Creon should be spending so many of these moments in burial rites which could have been rendered equally well after Antigone had been rescued: nay, when the rites have been finished, he remains to build a mound. The source of pathos contained in the words "too late" is available for Tragedy, but evidently there is one condition which must be observed. A fatal delay must not seem to be the result merely of negligence or of caprice.

Such is Jebb's criticism. In my judgment its main contentions are completely erroneous, the fundamental assumptions which underlie it are quite mistaken, and the conception of the poet is gravely misconceived. How generally is Jebb's conclusion accepted? A statement practically identical with Jebb's is found in Wolff's fourth edition, edited by Bellermann (1885). This, so far as I have seen, is the first appearance of this opinion; it was retained in the fifth edition, but is omitted in the sixth edition (1900). Of the editions most commonly used as textbooks in American colleges, Humphrey's edition (notes on vss. 1111, 1242) follows Jebb explicitly, especially as to his explanation of the reason for the assumed blemish. The Jebb-Schuckburgh school edition naturally follows the large edition. D'Ooge's edition, based on Wolff's second edition (1873), does not affirmatively support the blemish theory; the only mention of the matter is in a brief note on vs. 1110, quoted from Campbell, which hints at what I feel to be the sound opinion. Professor Palmer in his well-known translation gives to Jebb's theory his cordial approval ("as Professor Jebb admirably says" [p. 99]). Bayfield in his edition (Introd., p. xxix) considers Jebb's theory "highly probable." My own conclusion was reached before I had seen expressed any opinion differing from Jebb. Since then I have found a brief judgment similar to mine expressed by Campbell in a note in his large edition, vs. 1110 (second edition, 1879), and in his book *Tragic Drama in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Shakespeare*, p. 169—a statement occupying less than a page. Post in his rather careful study of Sophocles (*H.C.S.*, XXIII [1912], 71 ff.) does not mention this matter. Among the Germans, Seiler and Nake discuss the matter somewhat in Fleckeisen's *Jahrbücher*, CXLI (1890), 104 ff., 569 ff., 849 ff., Seiler raising some objections to Bellermann's statement, and Nake seeking to point out some errors in Seiler's discussion. I agree in part with both Seiler and Nake, but not entirely with either; owing to the limitation of time I shall here discuss the matter independently of both of them.

I realize that in the last analysis a question as to a defect in any work of art is a personal and subjective matter. In this case, however, as in most of such cases, certain questions of fact are

involved. I shall therefore attempt to distinguish as clearly as I can between matters of fact and matters of taste or opinion.

The first part of Jebb's criticism centers about the general implication of the words addressed by Teiresias to Creon, to the end of Teiresias' speech, vss. 998-1032. The lines which really determine this question are 996 and 1023-32. As to vs. 996 (Teiresias speaks), *φρόνει βεβῶς αὖ νῦν ἐπὶ ξυροῦ τύχης*, Jebb translates, "Mark that now once more thou standest on fate's fine edge."

In my judgment the phrase "on fate's fine edge" gives no clear and satisfactory meaning to *τύχης*. I believe that *τύχης* means here "misfortune," "calamity," a meaning of *τύχη* which is well authenticated in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (cf. *Aes. P.V.* 106; *Soph. O.C.* 1404; *Eur. Heracl.* 714; *Hec.* 786). I take the meaning to be therefore "Consider that now again you are standing on misfortune's razor-edge"; i.e., your equilibrium at the present time is very unstable and a slight error may cause you to fall into misfortune. Furthermore, it should be observed that it is possible that Teiresias by the use of *αὖ* here is referring to the death of Creon's son Megareus who, prompted by a prophecy of Teiresias, slew himself to secure the victory of the Thebans over the besieging Argive army.

In the first part of the long speech which follows Teiresias describes the bad omens which he read from the fighting birds and the burnt offerings, alleging that the altars and hearths have been tainted by birds and dogs with flesh from Polyneices' unburied body. He finishes with these words:

Think then my son on this. To err is common for all men; but when he has erred, that man is neither foolish nor unblest who, when he has fallen into evil seeks to cure it and does not remain implacable. Self-will incurs the charge of folly. Nay yield to the dead, stab not the fallen. What valor is it to slay anew the slain? My thought for you is kind; my words are kind. And to learn from a good counselor is very pleasant, if his counsel brings advantage.

Hereupon Creon angrily and harshly accuses Teiresias of being bribed to frighten him and after an angry altercation Teiresias definitely prophesies calamity for Creon. Now as to Jebb's interpretation. He says (1) that in this speech Teiresias "repre-

sented that Creon might still *be saved* by repentance," (2) that Teiresias' definite prophecy of disaster "assumed that Creon would remain obdurate," (3) that after Creon yielded, if he "had been in time to rescue Antigone" "he would have cancelled both offences"; and then the divine punishment predicted by Teiresias would have been averted. From each of these propositions I dissent. First as to proposition (1). On the basis of Jebb's interpretation, Teiresias in his first speech says to Creon: "If you will now bury Polyneices and release Antigone you will, I think, escape scot free"; or more fully, "although you have already defied heaven by refusing burial to Polyneices, although the body, putrefying under the mid-day heat, has already been mangled by dogs and birds, and the altars of our city have been defiled; although, in defiance of the principles of humanity, you have actually consigned your sister's child to a tomb, there to await the tortures of death by starvation, and this for an act which she felt to be dictated by her highest conception of duty and honor" (and which in the judgment of Sophocles was dictated by the "higher law"; cf. *O.T.* 865 ff.) "you can now escape all unhappy consequences by now, in response to my definite and solemn warning, changing your mind." Two related but separable questions are here involved. (1) Teiresias' opinion or feeling as to the possibility of repentance and escape (this of course ultimately goes back to Sophocles' conception); (2) Sophocles' opinion as to such a possibility, involving also his feeling as to the completeness and correctness of the prophet's knowledge of the future. First as to Teiresias. The impression which I get from the whole dialogue down to Creon's angry reply (vss. 1033 ff.) is this: Teiresias believes that Creon has sinned, and deeply, and that he is going to suffer for it. Even so he has sufficient interest in Creon's moral and material well-being to desire that he shall even now recognize his wrong (*ἀμαρτία*) and undo it so far as he can, and that thereby he shall *so far as is now possible* mitigate the impending punishment. Just how far this is now possible, in other words, what is the irreducible minimum of punishment for Creon, Teiresias does not definitely state. I admit readily that the immediate impression made by Teiresias' words upon a reader or a spectator of the play would probably

be that Creon could gain much by prompt repentance, in particular, that perhaps Antigone may yet be saved. And this, be it noted, is wholly desirable from the point of view of dramatic effectiveness. But a closer examination of the passage to a large degree dispels this impression. (a) As far as we know, Antigone may have been already dead when Teiresias' warning to Creon is being spoken. Since her exit at vs. 943 there has intervened a choral ode, which may doubtless dramatically furnish ample time for such a result. Moreover, there is, I think, a definite indication that Antigone took her life soon after her incarceration. Haemon left the stage at vs. 765, before Antigone's last appearance. Apparently when he reached the tomb he found Antigone already dead; otherwise he would have prevented her act. Does it not seem probable that knowing his father's purpose he would make his way to the tomb as quickly as possible after Antigone had been placed there? If so, the argument is strong that Antigone slew herself soon after being left in the tomb. (b) Note secondly that just 31 verses after the end of Teiresias' first speech (i.e., not over two or three minutes later) Teiresias prophesies plainly condign punishment. What is the reason for this changed tone of Teiresias' speaking? Jebb says, "because Creon was stubborn"; and maintains that he still has the opportunity "to cancel both his offences" and to avert the divine punishment predicted by Teiresias. My interpretation is different. In my view a presentiment in Teiresias' mind, already strong, that punishment is coming to Creon, is by Creon's stubborn refusal to yield made yet stronger and perhaps more definite. But as for his speaking out so positively now compared with his previous vagueness, the principal immediate cause is Teiresias' rising anger and resentment at the harsh accusations of Creon. In fact, Teiresias tells us so plainly at the end of his second speech, vss. 1084, 1088-90. The case of Teiresias before Oedipus in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is almost exactly similar. Take also vs. 1060: "You will move me to utter *τὰ κίνητα διὰ φρενῶν*, secrets in my soul (mind) which ought to be let alone." According to Jebb's interpretation *τὰ κίνητα* must be secrets which have been lodged in his mind only about a minute. To me these words imply rather secrets which were in his mind at least before he

entered the stage. So much as to Teiresias' attitude on the matter of Creon's punishment, so far as it is discoverable from the play.

I pass now to what seems to me the really fundamental question, i.e., what would Sophocles as a writer of tragedies and a student of human life regard as probable under the imagined circumstances. This means, what in Sophocles' judgment would the fundamental laws of morality, ethics, religion, require in such a case. It is of course futile to ask at just what moment by the decree of fate—the gods, necessity—did it become irrevocably fixed that events should take precisely the course which they did take; this is impossible of solution by human beings no less now in the twentieth Christian century than in the fifth century before Christ. But it is *not* futile or absurd to ask this question: In the light of all the facts, was it to Sophocles ethically or morally justifiable, or possible, that one who had sinned as Creon had, should by a change of heart at this time "wash all his sins away"? Such a question involves certain other large questions as to the ethical and religious ideas of fifth-century Athens—much too large for full discussion here. Would not Jebb's interpretation imply the conception of forgiveness by some higher power of positive wrong—forgiveness, moreover, which includes release of the wrongdoer from punishment? There seems to be no warrant for any such conception in fifth-century Athens.¹ According to my idea, to the question which I asked above, the whole spirit of Greek ethics and morals says no. This case apart, is there any such example in Sophocles? The voice of Greek tragedy hereon is resonant and unequivocal. The law of causation in the Greek moral world is not so weak and feeble as that. Often enough we moderns in reading Greek tragedy are vastly impressed with the feeling that the punishment of wrong exceeds, or seems to exceed, the sin (cf. Prometheus, Agamemnon, Orestes, Hippolytus, Antigone), but where in Greek tragedy is a person who is portrayed as a notable violator of moral laws allowed to go free?

Place side by side two pictures: Oedipus the king, a man intrinsically noble, kindly, honest, generous, and sympathetic, for a relatively slight fault, so far as his own moral choice is concerned,

¹ Cf. Fairbanks, *Greek Religion*, pp. 342 ff.

suffers a crushing calamity; Creon, who has violated knowingly and deliberately the most sacred laws of religion and of humanity, only when he is scared by the solemn warning of a seer abandons his purpose, and thereby moves into the sunlight of happiness and prosperity. No, I agree with Symonds (*S.G.P.*, I, 434): "The conviction that what a man sows he will reap and that the world is not ruled by blind chance the Greeks held as securely, at least, as we do."

Now as to Teiresias' feeling upon this question; assuming the correctness of my view of Sophocles' opinion, is it probable that Sophocles would conceive and portray Teiresias the prophet as holding on this matter an opinion materially different from his own? I see no reason either on general a priori grounds, or in the words of the play itself to think so. All lines of reasoning point the other way. This then is my answer to Jebb's first proposition, that Teiresias believed and represented in his first speech that Creon could be saved by repentance.

Jebb's second proposition may be dealt with very briefly. He says that Teiresias' definite prophecy of disaster assumed "that Creon would remain obdurate." Jebb gives no evidence whatever of this; there is certainly no such evidence in the play. Moreover, Jebb himself a few lines below directly contradicts this statement. He says: "But the dramatic function of Teiresias obviously requires us to assume that he was infallible whenever he spoke from 'the signs of his art'"; and he very properly refers to vss. 1092 ff.—which follow immediately after Teiresias' prediction—where the coryphaeus says: "We know that since our hair once black has been white he has never yet made a false prophecy to the city." This passage alone makes it entirely probable that Jebb's second proposition is erroneous.

The third proposition as I stated it above was that if Creon had been in time to save Antigone he would have canceled both offenses; and then we must infer that the divine punishment would have been averted. If my arguments already presented as to the first proposition are correct, this statement cannot be accepted.

This brings us to the second general part of Jebb's criticism wherein he points out what he feels to be "a real blemish." Jebb says that "while we are anxious that Antigone should be saved and while every moment is precious," Creon, without any sufficient reason and contrary to what the circumstances would suggest, buries Polyneices and raises a mound before he goes to Antigone. "We are not given any reason for the burial being taken in hand before the release." In the first place, I answer, Jebb's main assumption that "everything depended on Creon being in time to save Antigone" has been shown to be erroneous. The fact of punishment to come was henceforth certain; the suggestion, however, that its actual form *might* have been different, while perhaps true, seems to me not really pertinent nor profitable. But the other question which Jebb raises *is* pertinent, i.e.: Does that which actually happens after Creon's change of mind happen in accordance with the known material and human factors in the situation, or, in the language of Aristotle, "by a probable or necessary sequence"? Jebb says no; he implies that the fatal delay seems to be the result merely of negligence or of caprice. I say that not only is the course of events sufficiently accounted for, but that it could not consistently with the rest of the play have happened otherwise; and that this part of the play testifies clearly to Sophocles' ability firmly to carry a dramatic situation through to its just conclusion, to his subtle and profound insight into human nature, and to his power to portray character with undeviating and relentless consistency.

Some of Jebb's statements in support of his conclusion are, I think, quite incorrect. He says that Creon and his servants after burying Polyneices raised "a high mound," *τύμβον ὀρθόκρανον* (vs. 1203). But *ὀρθός*, so far as I can discover, never means literally "high," but rather (1) upright, as opposed to horizontal, or (2) straight ahead, *rectus*, as opposed to crooked. He says that "in any case the margin for Creon must have been a narrow one." But what necessary reason was there why Antigone should either commit suicide at all, or, if so, should do it very quickly after being immured? Be it noted (1) that the tomb where Antigone was

placed was high enough for her to stand erect in, or nearly so, otherwise she could not have hung herself; and (2) that she had at least a little food, given her that the city might avoid defilement. Notice too that when Antigone left the stage her nerve seemed to be shaken somewhat, in view of which one might perhaps assume that she would not have the self-possession and the decision which are undoubtedly necessary to one who is to take his own life.

But these after all are merely incidental considerations and as such only I reckon them. The really determining factor in the situation is the character of Creon, the portrayal of which in this play I consider to be one of the most skilful to be found in the entire range of dramatic characterization, and which for clearness, consistency, solidity, and truth to a certain type of human nature has rarely been surpassed. And what were the dominant characteristics in his make-up? Creon was a man of a wooden, mechanical type of mind; one who in thought and conduct was guided, not by clear-eyed, self-reliant, discriminating intelligence, but by narrow, mechanical rules-of-thumb. He was almost completely lacking in that invaluable quality, imagination; in the ability to see the other man's point of view, the power of taking into one comprehensive purview varied and conflicting factors in a situation; he could see only one or two things clearly at a time. But within this limited range of vision his power of vigorous concentrated action and of stubborn perseverance was great. Quite in accord with this type of character, he was pious and god-fearing, but in a narrow, uninspired, indiscriminating way; he stood mightily in awe of the powers of heaven when once he thought he knew what those powers were demanding. He was a man who would anxiously tithe mint and cummin, and neglect justice and mercy. As to his emotional nature, Creon was thoroughly hard, rigid, and metallic, and almost completely lacking in warm human sympathy. I think the correctness of this characterization could be fully established from the play as a whole. Is not this precisely the type of man whose action in certain circumstances was likely to be, though narrowly and rigidly logical, yet quite wrong-headed?

As to the course, then, of Creon's action after he changes his mind, you can now see what my answer will be to Jebb's objection.

I heartily agree with him that a fatal delay must not seem to be the result merely of negligence or of caprice; but I emphatically maintain that such is not the case with the events in question. After Teiresias' second speech and the comments of the chorus thereon, Creon is at last convinced that he has flagrantly violated the will of heaven; as a result of this realization he is thoroughly scared. But it is clear from vss. 1095-1106 that his yielding is due, not primarily to any real penitence on his part, not to a "conviction of sin," but to superstitious terror and to the conviction that it is useless to contend against the superior force of necessity (vs. 1106: *ἀνάγκη οὐχὶ δυσμαχήμενον*). His first thought is to forestall if possible the calamities which were prophesied for his own household, and also, I think, to turn the wrath of the gods away from the state; for with all Creon's narrowness, he is sincerely devoted to the welfare of the state. Let it be observed also that in this emergency Creon's self-possession is somewhat disturbed, his intellectual and moral equilibrium is somewhat impaired, and his action is somewhat hurried and precipitate. On the other hand, nowhere in the whole course of the play does Creon show any real sympathy for Antigone; compare, e.g., the attitude of Creon with that of the chorus. Not one word of sympathy with Antigone does Creon utter either when he sees her on her way to the tomb, or after he returns with the body of Haemon. In view of all these considerations it seems to me to have been entirely in accord with the material and human factors that Creon should act as he did. Especially, too, is this conclusion confirmed if we may imagine that the way to Antigone's tomb would naturally have taken a person near or in sight of the dead body of Polyneices. In that case every dominant element in Creon's character would have driven him to satisfy to the last jot and tittle the external religious demands before he passed on. The play does not indicate definitely the location of Polyneices' burial place and of Antigone's tomb. From certain indications given in the play I regard it as probable that they were not far apart.

Finally, as to the reason which Jebb gives for Creon's delay; he suggests that if Creon had reversed the order of action, i.e., if he had first gone to Antigone's tomb, then to Polyneices, there

would have been an anticlimax in the messenger's speech, "by which its rhetorical impressiveness would have been destroyed." Of course, according to the argument of this paper, the delay is amply explained by the play itself. But even if this were not so, I regard Jebb's suggestion as very weak and wholly unconvincing. In the existing messenger's speech the account of the burial of Polyneices occupies eight verses. Did Jebb seriously think that if the order of events had been reversed, Sophocles did not have sufficient skill so to construct his messenger's report as to meet every dramatic and rhetorical requirement? Or that to avoid such a difficulty Sophocles, who in general shows such scrupulous care for consistency in dramatic detail within the play itself and in characterization, has knowingly in this play violated such consistency? In my judgment such a conclusion could be accepted only for reasons vastly stronger than those which are given by Mr. Jebb.